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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a project designed to improve student achievement through better communication between parents/guardians and teachers of 7th-grade math students in a large, north-central Illinois urban community. Analysis of probable-cause data revealed that no structured means of communication existed. Attempts to communicate were thwarted by students not taking written materials home, the absence of phones in the home, and the problem of non-English-speaking parents/guardians. Improvement strategies fell into five process objectives: (1) initiate contact to establish methods of communication; (2) establish a format for consistent communication; (3) establish verification procedures to ensure contacts are made; (4) produce student/teacher co-evaluation; and (5) encourage parent/student discussion of evaluation. The change in curriculum midproject made the original goals of this project unattainable. The general aim of the project to improve communication did have its benefits. In the class where the intervention was carried out, students and parents were more willing to communicate their ideas and concerns to the teacher. Appendixes contain study questionnaires and forms. (Contains 34 references.) (Author/GLR)

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HOME - SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

[Seventh Grade]

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by

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Action Research Final Report
Site: Rockford, IL
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DEDICATIONS

First, to my wife Linda for her encouragement, faith and belief that I could do it.

Second, to Bruce H. Moe, my co-researcher who never lost hope and whose calm I depended upon.

Third, to three great women, Cassie, Judy, and Kathy who helped make the last two years bearable and sometimes even fun.

Fourth, to Lynne who, with my wife, got me into the program and then had to reteach me how to use a library.

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ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Jaxon C. Oshita **SITE:** Rockford I
DATE: April 1994

TITLE: Home - School Communication

ABSTRACT: This project is designed to improve student achievement through better communication between parents/ guardians and teachers of seventh grade math students in a large urban community, located in north central Illinois. The problem was originally noted through teacher discussion of personal observations and was confirmed by a parent questionnaire.

Analysis of probable cause data revealed that no structured means of communication exists. Attempts to communicate are thwarted by students not taking written materials home, the absence of phones in the home, and the problem of non-English speaking parents/guardians.

Improvement strategies fall into five process objectives: 1) initiate contact to establish methods of communication, 2) establish a format for consistent communication, 3) establish verification procedures to ensure contacts are made, 4) produce student/teacher co-evaluation, 5) encourage parent/student discussion of evaluation.

The change in curriculum mid-project made the original goals of this project unattainable. The general aim of the project to improve communication did have its benefits. In the class where the intervention was carried out, students and parents were more willing to communicate their ideas and concerns to the teacher.

Chapter 1

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM AND DESCRIPTION OF SETTING

Problem Statement

One of the problems impacting student achievement in fourth period math was the lack of quantitative and qualitative communication between the home and school. The problem was first evidenced by a parent questionnaire and through teacher discussion. The lack of a structured means of home-school communication limited the exchange of information which hindered the cooperative effort of parents and teacher to aid student achievement.

Description of Immediate Problem Setting

The middle school was an inner-city school of just under one thousand students located in north central Illinois. The school contained seventh and eighth grades with students ranging in age from eleven to fifteen. There were special programs within the school for physically, mentally, and hearing impaired students. In accordance with federal guidelines students designated for mainstreaming or inclusion were placed into regular programs whenever possible.

The middle school was in the process of adapting the "middle school concept." Specifically this consisted of dividing the faculty into teams of five core teachers and

assigning them approximately 110 students. The core teachers represented English, science, social studies, mathematics and physical education. Core teachers met on a set schedule to plan and coordinate educational goals for the students assigned to them in whatever manner deemed appropriate. This approach included interdisciplinary units or field trips involving all five or any combination of core members. Average class size was 21.4 students (including special education classes where class size was limited by law).

There was a concerted effort on the part of the middle school's administrators and staff to identify and implement self-help and self-awareness programs to assist students, across grade levels, to deal with the conflicts associated with this transescent stage. Elkind (quoted in Cottle, 1991) felt that "during transescence, the stress of these youngsters may reveal itself through oppositional behavior toward their parents. Perhaps communication and cooperation between parents and teachers could help both of them to recognize the point of view of the youngster and work together effectively to reduce the stress causing the behavior" (p. 20). Programs included dealing with grief or anger, mentoring, drug and alcohol abuse, peer mediation and intervention.

The racial/ethnic background of the students was: White 71.9 percent, Black 15.6 percent, Hispanic 9.2 percent, Asian/Pacific Islander 3.2 percent, Native American 0.1

percent. Low income students (defined as those from families receiving public aid, living in institutions for neglected or delinquent children, being supported in foster homes with public funds or eligible to receive free or reduced-priced lunches) represented 27.4 percent of the student population. Limited-English-Proficient students (those tested and found eligible for bilingual education) represented 5.9 percent of the student population.

The 1991-92 attendance rate for the middle school was 90.9 percent. The portion of students entering or leaving the school during the school year was 16 percent. The number of chronic truants (those absent without valid cause for 10 percent or more of the last 180 school days) was 241.

The percent of students promoted from the seventh grade to the eighth grade was 96.5 percent. This figure included students who were "socially promoted" and students who were promoted by parental request.

The Illinois Goal Assessment Program (IGAP) test was given to all eighth grade students at the end of the 1991-92 school year. Only scores for those students who took all parts of the test are counted. IGAP scoring was based on the premise that 25 percent of the students' scores would fall into each of the four quartiles. The test was administered to 407 of the middle school's students. Table 1 represents the results of the IGAP test. An analysis of the data indicates at least 50 percent of the students tested fall below the 50th percentile in all areas.

Table 1
Illinois Goal Assessment Program
Results for Middle School
Spring 1992
(Percent)

Reading				Mathematics			
Top Qtr	3rd Qtr	2nd Qtr	1st Qtr	Top Qtr	3rd Qtr	2nd Qtr	1st Qtr
21	20	20	39	28	20	20	33

Science			
Top Qtr	3rd Qtr	2nd Qtr	1st Qtr
30	21	26	24

The Stanford Achievement Test was also administered to the same students under virtually the same conditions. The results of the Stanford are listed in table 2.

Table 2
Stanford Achievement Test Form J
Results for Middle School
Spring 1992
(Percent)

Reading Comprehension					Mathematics				
Top Qtr	3rd Qtr	2nd Qtr	1st Qtr	% Tested	Top Qtr	3rd Qtr	2nd Qtr	1st Qtr	% Tested
18	25	23	34	95.8	21	19	23	37	95.0
Science					Social Studies				
Top Qtr	3rd Qtr	2nd Qtr	1st Qtr	% Tested	Top Qtr	3rd Qtr	2nd Qtr	1st Qtr	% Tested
18	22	25	35	95.1	17	22	24	37	95.1

The Stanford conveys a disappointing view of the achievement of the students. Nearly 60 percent of the students tested fell below the 50th percentile in all academic disciplines.

The middle school was built in the 1920's with traditional classrooms. Many of the larger art and music rooms have been subdivided into smaller classrooms. There were no large common areas that might be used for team teaching situations. An oddity of the school was that its cafeteria was on the third floor, an eccentricity that no one seemed able to explain. The library was light and airy, an up-to-date, modern facility, and yet one seldom found students in attendance. The school had two administrators, a principal and an assistant principal. There were three counselors, a full time nurse and an off-duty police officer hired to serve as liaison to assist in handling disturbances.

The Community

The city is located in north central Illinois approximately 100 miles northwest of Chicago and covers 50 square miles. At the time of the study, there was a racially diverse population of 139,426. The unemployment rate for the area fluctuated at approximately 7.5 percent. Median household income was $28,282.

According to the 1990 census figures the community had 11.2 percent single parent households with school age children. This represented both male and female heads-of-households. Of persons over 18 years of age, 25.7 percent

had not received a high school diploma, 22.4 percent had a post high school degree.

At one time the city was a leader in the machine tool industry, but many companies had been leaving the area. As in other cities, there had been a decline in the vitality of the downtown area with many of the commercial stores moving to area shopping malls.

A river divides the city into east and west, although in recent years there had been a major attempt to ignore this physical landmark. A central high school was abandoned in the early 1940's in favor of two separate high schools, east and west, creating an east side - west side perception. Recent growth of the city had been to the east for both business and housing. This growth had caused a "have/have-not" situation in the school district. The newer east side schools had benefitted from newer more affluent home environments that subsequently resulted in more substantial personal contributions made to neighborhood schools.

In the late 1980's a decision was made to close the west high school and reassign those students. This resulted in other school closings and redistricting. A group of parents formed a coalition and filed a lawsuit charging discrimination in how the closings were handled. The racial make up of the students most involved added to the perception of discriminatory practices. The lawsuit served as a springboard to include all manner of racial, social,

and ethnic discrimination within the community concerning education. Many changes had been made in the school district to serve the educational needs of minority groups. Many of these changes had been ordered by the court (without regard to cost), even though the school district had not been found guilty of discrimination. And the cost had been significant. The district was on the verge of bankruptcy and had been ordered by the court to levy taxes to cover the cost of the lawsuit changes.

The local newspaper had covered details of the lawsuit and its cost to the taxpayers many times. The tax increases already generated by the law suit were largely responsible for the overwhelming defeat of a referendum in a recent election. Through interviews and "letters-to-the-editor," the citizenry expressed a very negative view of the educational process.

Regional and National Significance

Journals such as the **NASSP Bulletin** (National Association for Secondary School Principals) (Stouffer, 1992) and **Education and Urban Society** (Epstein, 1987) have advocated better communication between the school and parent/community. Both these publications have had an influence on the proliferation of the "parent-teacher conference." Until recently, however, these conferences had been limited to the elementary grades. With the adoption of the middle school concept, there had been an extension of the practice into the middle school. Parent-teacher conferences had done much

to improve communication between the school and parent, but conferences were not enough. "Teachers need to stay in constant contact with the home by personal (not form) letters requiring a response and by telephone." (Simmons, 1990, p. 224).

Acknowledgment of the problem extends beyond the confines of the academic citadel. Popular magazines - **Redbook** (Billingsley, 1991), **McCall's** (Manske, 1992), **Better Homes and Gardens** ("Five Toughest Parent-School Conflicts," 1985), **Ladies' Home Journal** ("Parent-Teacher Conferences," 1983), **Good Housekeeping** (Cenedella, 1989) and **Parents** (Costello, 1986; LeShan, 1990; Segal, 1986) - carried various articles on improving communication between schools and the home. In "School: the Parent Factor," Senator Bill Bradley pointed out, "...schools should reach out to parents, show them how to extend and enrich classroom lessons..." (1988, p. 112). News magazines - **Newsweek, Nation's Business,** and **U.S. News & World Report** - wrote about the necessity of schools providing the parent with as much on-going information as possible. "Where are the parents?" asked McCormick. "Fathers and mothers blame everyone but themselves for Johnny's tepid academic performance" (1990, p. 55). The author pointed to improved parent-teacher relationships as a key to improving student performance. Professional journals - **Phi Delta Kappan** (Henderson, 1988; Walberg, 1984), **Education Digest** (Nelson, 1988), **Childhood Education** (Gelfer, 1991), and **Teaching K-8**

(Canter, 1989), **Instructor** (Fredricks & Harrington, 1983) - also stressed the importance of making the parent part of the educational process.

The articles in these magazines and journals concentrated on the effects of communicating with parents within the conference setting (Ciscell, 1990; Costello, 1986; Epstein, 1987; Fredericks, 1983; Simmons, 1990). They also mention the importance of frequent newsletters to keep parents up-to-date and informed on what is happening in their schools (Costa, 1991; Dornbusch and Ritter, 1988; Gelfer, 1991; Nelson, 1988; Stouffer, 1992).

Improving Communication between Parents and Teachers of Middle School Age Students by the Use of the Telephone and Other Techniques, a doctoral dissertation by William E. Cottle (1991), and **Improving Parent Involvement through More Effective School-Home Communications,** a paper delivered by Richard F. Purnell and Edward E. Gotts (1983) at the meeting of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, both dealt more with "how" than "what" information is communicated. Purnell and Gotts sought to measure communication between the school and home, while Cottle sought to improve it. Purnell and Gotts found parents were receptive to information in newsletters and personal notification that their student was in need of assistance. Cottle instituted a telephone communication system which was well-received and led to an increase in homework completion.

Chapter 2

PROBLEM EVIDENCE AND PROBABLE CAUSE

Problem Background

As stated in Chapter One, there was greater need for communication between the home and school. Research by Cattermole and Robinson (1985) ranked children first as both their parents' most frequent and preferred source of information about a school. Children were not seen as the most effective method of communication, however. Their research indicated the direct approach (phone or personal contact) ranked number one with nearly ninety per cent of the parents returning surveys. The method of communication was one area that needed to be improved in our school situation. Students had been shown not to be a reliable intermediary between the home and school. Direct communication between the parent (parent will indicate both parent and guardian) and teacher became requisite.

In the 1992-1993 school year middle schools in the district initiated parent/teacher conferences. Each team was encouraged to meet with as many parents as possible within the time constraints of the school day. Response from both teachers and parents was encouraging. The program was extended the following year was to encourage parents and any other interested parties to visit classrooms.

Problem Evidence

One way that secondary teachers attempted to keep parents informed of academic performance was the progress report, distributed to students during the fifth week of each nine week quarter. At the middle school, progress reports were to be hand carried home, signed by the parent, and returned to the school. Team B, the S.W.E.A.T. B's (Students With Excellent Awesome Talent) the researcher's academic team, had a return of 33 percent in 1993 first quarter progress reports. Subsequent contacts with parents often revealed the fact that these progress reports were never delivered. By the time the follow-up contacts were made, it was often too late for any remedial measures to affect the current grading period.

A parent questionnaire distributed in mid-May asked parents if they had been contacted by the school (positively or negatively), by whom specifically, whether they were satisfied with the contact, the methods used for those contacts, and what involvement the parent had with the school. The purpose was to: 1) to find just how many would be returned, and 2) to get an indication of how much the parents were involved with their schools.

The parent questionnaire distributed in the district's four middle schools resulted in a return of approximately 9 percent (see Appendix A). Many teachers offered students points toward their grades or other incentives and the return was still very low. The researcher was unable to

determine if the low return was the result of surveys not taken home or parents' lack of interest.

The low return makes definitive conclusions impossible. Eighty-two percent of those who did respond felt that contacts with the school were beneficial. For personal contact the most preferred and most often used method was the telephone. Seventy-five percent of those who answered the survey indicated that the telephone was the method they preferred when contacted by the school.

Probable Causes

Returns from the survey and comments from teachers about the survey indicated that the low returns resulted from some common problems with all information meant for the home. Many students did not take any materials home, a number of the students did not have telephones, and another segment did not have parents that spoke or read English. Another contributing cause of the problem was that the parent often did not know what or when material, such as progress reports, were to be sent home. The absence of an initial parent contact informing them of what to expect and when to expect it meant that parents were unaware that the information was sent or even available. Therefore parents did not question the student or teachers as to the whereabouts of that information.

In a survey of high school parents, Purnell and Gotts (1983) found that although over two-thirds of the parents attended extra-curricular activities (particularly athletic

events) an even greater proportion did not attend parent meetings or parent advisory council meetings. In the researcher's experience, participation of secondary parents in local PTO's was extremely limited. At both middle and high school levels, lack of parent interest along with lack of student interest were ranked relatively high in intensity for both parents and teachers (Goodlad, 1984).

Finding time to communicate with parents was a real issue for teachers who already struggle with numerous other responsibilities. The workload of teachers discourages them from actively working with parents (Epstein and Becker, 1982; Rasinski and Fredericks, 1989). A key to improving communication, as described by Vandegrift and Greene, was "meeting parents where they are" (1992, p. 57). The Arizona At-Risk Pilot Project (1988) suggested the most effective means of involving parents was to establish personal rapport and not initially require high levels of commitment. "Something as simple as a friendly conversation with the classroom teacher can go a long way toward building parental support" (p. 59). Effective Schooling Practices would ensure "frequent two-way communication with parents" (Pochowski, 1992).

Public perception of parental responsibilities as indicated in a recent Gallup Poll of public attitudes toward public schools found 96% of respondents believed it is very important to encourage parents to take an active role in the education of their children (Elam, Rose, and Gallup, 1993)

Research on Effective Schools both parochially (Epstein, 1987) and nationally (Reisner and Haslam, 1992) point to parental involvement as one of 10 key issues. In Chicago's "Schoolwatch" program, parental involvement was one of four factors in effective schools that should improve student achievement (Hawley and Rosenholtz cited in Epstein, 1987). One finding of "What Works: Research about teaching and learning" (cited in Pochowski, 1992) concluded "parental involvement helps children learn more effectively. Teachers who are successful at involving parents in their children's schoolwork are successful because they work at it" (p. 9). A subsequent study found "students whose teachers frequently used parent involvement made greater gains in reading achievement (but not in math achievement) than did other students from fall to spring" (Epstein, 1987, p. 128).

Cottle (1991) cites a study by Thompson which sheds some light on the reasons for strained home-school relations after elementary school:

> Thompson's 1981 study suggested that students entering the seventh grade displayed a sudden increase in "alienated behavior" (p. 8). This changed behavior was attributed to the structure of the secondary school which promoted a social climate inclined to discourage home-school relations. According to Thompson (1981), this division between home and school contributed to "deteriorating parent-child communication patterns" (p. 9), which promoted undesirable adolescent

behaviors. The importance of mitigating against this split between the home and the school which occurred at this time of transition was clearly implied by this research. (p. 24)

Lamm (1986) suggested that one reason that parents of average and lower level students may be less apt to involve themselves with teachers and the schools in the education of their children relates to American attitudes toward academic achievement. He said that many American parents believe that innate ability is a more important determinant of academic success than is the amount of effort put forth by the student. This belief could encourage apathy on the part of both parents and teachers. If parents believe that the student is not of superior ability, then communication and cooperation to promote maximum effort from the student is of little consequence. According to Lamm, parents must become more involved in schools and in encouraging their children to work hard to learn at home if these children are to reach their full potential.

Chapter 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Research and Review of the Literature

The researcher used the descriptor "Home-School Communication" to narrow the search of the literature. The information the researcher was seeking was in the area of how an ongoing dialogue between the teacher and the parent could be established and maintained.

There were nearly 700 sources dealing with parent-teacher conferences and the direct involvement of parents in the school, mostly for pre-school and elementary levels. The preponderance of the literature was on how to conduct a conference, but little was has been written about ongoing communication. The researcher looked for information specifically on how to establish contact with parents and how to keep the lines of communication open and productive.

Cattermole and Robinson (1985) pointed out that, with the large number of districts working to establish communication links between the home and school, "one might logically suppose that these steps are firmly grounded in research... In fact, surprisingly little research has been done on the topic of home/school communication" (p. 48).

Cottle (1991) citing Epstein (1987), Weidman and LeMahleu (1985) and Stevenson and Baker (1987) concluded, "some published findings suggest that the problem of poor

parent-teacher communication is significant" (p. 22). A survey of teachers, parents, and students in the San Francisco Bay area by Dornbusch and Ritter (1986) suggested that parent-teacher communication may be even worse at the high school level. In their survey of over 300 high school teachers, over half reported only a little contact with parents regardless of the different types of students. Stevenson and Baker (1987), using a national sample, found declining parental involvement in educational activities as their children grew older, particularly for boys. Weldman and LeMahleu found "a surprising lack of parental involvement in schoolwork. . .at the middle school level among the most highly educated parents" (Cottle, 1991, p. 23).

A recurring theme in the literature was the necessity of involving parents in the educational process. Avoiding an adversarial position was important in keeping parents involved. "Educators must not assume that socioeconomically poor parents are poor parents. The school must work with parents from an empowerment rather than a deficit model of parent involvement" (Stouffer, 1992, p. 7). "Even those teachers who did not consciously try to discourage parents from working with them may have been seen by parents as authority figures and therefore unapproachable" (Cottle, 1991, p. 21).

Project Objectives

The first terminal objective of parent-teacher intervention was related to academic performance in the classroom

as measured by quantitative and qualitative improvement in communication between the home and school. Therefore:

> As a result of improved parental contact during the second quarter of the first semester of the 1993-1994 school year, the fourth period seventh grade math students will improve their second quarter average grade five tenths of a point as compared to their first quarter average grade. Concomitantly there will be a rise in the percentage of assignments turned in.

Academic achievement was directly related to both the personal conduct of the student as well as the circumjacence of the classroom. Parental involvement to monitor student behavior was essential to achieve the first objective. Therefore the second terminal objective was:

> As a result of improved parental contact during the second quarter of the 1993-1994 school year, the fourth period seventh grade math students' behavior will improve as measured by observation check list and discipline referrals.

In order to accomplish the terminal objectives, the following process objectives defined the parameters for problem resolution.

> 1) In order to improve parental contact, during the latter portion of the first quarter of school, 100 percent of parents were contacted about methods and frequency of communication.
>
> 2) In order to maintain a high level of communication, 100 percent of parents were contacted once every two weeks by phone or in writing to inform them of student academic and behavioral progress.
>
> 3) In order to ensure 100 percent contact, a phone log was maintained and signature confirmation for all written documents was established.
>
> 4) In order to maintain the focus on academic and behavioral achievement, students, parents and teachers co-authored bi-weekly evaluations which were signed by all parties.

Project Solution Components

The major element was to establish and maintain open communication throughout the education triangle (parent, student and teacher). The first component of the strategy was to establish expectations with input from each of the three sides. It was imperative that everyone understood how and when communication was to take place and their respective role in that communication. Each member, through their participation, increased their awareness of and responsibility to the triangle. The parent became a utilitarian team member rather than an uninformed outsider. It was anticipated that student motivation would increase due to their awareness of the frequency and quality of parent feedback.

Chapter 4

ACTION PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Description for Implementing the Solution Strategy

The action plan was designed to address three major solution components: designing a communication format to be informative and timely, involving parents and students in understanding evaluations, and involving parents, students and the teacher in addressing problem areas.

The parent-teacher communication method was to be established by the end of the first quarter through discussion and consensus of parents and teachers. Parent choices were: student delivered, teacher mailed, or direct phone contact. (Appendix B)

Students wrote self-evaluations which were discussed and edited with the teacher. Parents were encouraged to review the reports with the students as they were received. The evaluation forms were designed to stimulate discussion of all areas of the students' performance in class. Stem statements were provided to encourage discussion of positive areas of the students' performance which had too often been neglected in parent-teacher communication. Stem statements were also provided to direct the students into metacognitive thought focused on improving their performance. The purpose of this component was to demonstrate to parents and students

how the students' activities and attitudes related to achieving their academic goals. (Appendix C)

The researcher also provided both parents and students with suggestions to optimize the effectiveness of the evaluation. Strategies to solve problem areas were evolved from teacher, student and parent input based on the content of the evaluation.

The implementation plan is described below in outline form.

I. Initial Contacts

- A. Who: Classroom teacher
- B. What: Contact 100 percent of parents of students
- C. When: During the latter portion of the first quarter
- D. How: Letters, phone, or in person as needed
- E. Where: The researcher's school - Lincoln
- F. Why: To inform parents of the researcher's plan and establish a format for future communication

II. Continuing Communications

- A. Who: Teacher, student and parents
- B. What: The evaluation form for each student
- C. When: Bi-weekly
- D. How: As per method agreed upon with parent
- E. Why: To insure that parents, students and teacher were all informed and active in effectuating problem solving strategies as well as encouraging positive behaviors.

Method of Assessment

Academic assessment was a comparison of average grade (using a four point system) for the twenty-two students in fourth period math between first and second quarter of the 1993-1994 school year. The percentage of assignments turned in was compared between the two quarters. Behavioral patterns were monitored through observation check lists, the number of discipline referrals and anecdotal comments from parents, teachers and students.

Chapter 5

Evaluation of Results and Process

Implementation History

The terminal objectives of the intervention addressed the impact of improving the quantity and quality of communication between the home and school on grades, homework, and behavior. The background of this concern was generally through conversations with teachers at all levels in informal gatherings. The review of the literature reinforced the concern that parents were often not kept up to date on their student's performance in the classroom. The terminal objectives stated:

> As a result of improved parental contact during the second quarter of the first semester of the 1993-1994 school year, the seventh grade math students will improve their second quarter average grade five tenths of a point as compared to their first quarter average grade. Concomitantly there will be a rise in the percentage of assignments turned in.
>
> As a result of improved parental contact during the second quarter of the 1993-1994 school year, the seventh grade math students' behavior will improve as measured by observation check list and discipline referrals.

The implementation strategy was threefold. First, the teacher/researcher (hereafter referred to as "researcher") contacted the parent of every student in the target class. The contact was to establish the parameters of the research. The purpose of the program was explained to each parent and the method of communication was established; a choice of

phone call or printed survey was given (every parent opted for the printed survey to be sent home with the student).

Second, the researcher developed a form using stem statements to help open the lines of communication. The student had four statements to complete, the parents had three, and the researcher added comments. (Appendix D)

Third, the researcher asked the parents to discuss the survey with their student. Parents were also asked to contact the teacher with any concerns or information that the researcher might need to know that was not included in the survey. The researcher, in turn, dealt with the comments of students and parents who indicated a problem on their survey in an appropriate manner (either supplemental coverage of subject matter or private discussion with the student or parent). A log was maintained of surveys that were returned signed to ensure the continuity of communication. When surveys were not returned or were not signed, the researcher phoned the parent to verify their participation.

The researcher began the process two weeks before the end of the first quarter. An explanation of the background and purpose of the project was given to the students. They were told that their comments were not going to be graded, and they were free to make any comments they thought appropriate. A letter explaining the project was handed out to be delivered to their parents. Students were also asked to explain the project to their parents. On a tear-off

portion of the letter, parents indicated their choice between student carried survey or phone contact.

Out of twenty-two students, nineteen returned the survey indicating a preference for student carried survey, two gave no indication (subsequent phone contact resulted in verbal preference for the student carried survey), and one was not returned. Followup on the one not returned was complicated by no phone and a temporary address. Luck (the parent called for a personal conference) provided the researcher opportunity to use the survey for a concrete example of its purpose. The parent was looking for a way to keep better track of the student's progress in math class.

The evaluation survey was given to half the students on Fridays of alternating weeks. The students had the class period to complete the survey and a reduced homework load for that day. The researcher then added comments over the weekend, and the survey was returned to the students on Monday. The student carried the survey home to the parent for their part of the cycle.

Student stem statements were: 1) I have improved. . ., 2) I need to improve. . ., 3) I really need help with. . ., 4) I would like my parents to know. . . Students were reluctant to express themselves in any depth. Although encouraged to write whatever they felt about the class or themselves, they answered most stem statements in less that six words: "a lot," "a little," "nothing," "nothing much," or simply the name of the particular area they were covering

at the time (integers, whole numbers, order of operations). Some students were brutally honest with their statements and seemed to have a good grasp of their areas of strengths and weaknesses.

Parent stem statements were: 1) I have seen (name) improve in. . ., 2) I am concerned about. . ., 3) (name) and I have discussed. . . Parent comments were slightly more verbose but varied only slightly in content from what the students wrote. Some parents expressed real concern with their student's progress or lack of it. Some parents simply signed their name.

The researcher tried to keep comments completely positive to begin with but as time went on and parents and students became more confident of the process, comments became more constructive. Both good and bad areas were covered while still trying to make students and parents feel comfortable and encouraged.

The form itself also evolved as the project continued. The researcher highlighted the student and parent section titles with different colors. Then the researcher used the address book capabilities of his computer and printed the student's name in the appropriate places on the form, giving the appearance of a personalized form.

Presentation and Analysis of Project Results

In order to assess the effects of the planned intervention, student grades and assignments were analyzed for the

first quarter and compared with the same results for the second quarter. The results are summarized in table 3.

Table 3

Grade and Homework Totals for First and Second Quarter
Seventh Grade, Fourth Period, Pre-Algebra Students

Student number	1st qtr. grade/value	Homework/ percentage	2nd qtr. grade/value	Homework/ percentage
1	A/4	31/100	A/4	33/ 97
2	A/4	30/ 97	C/2	29/ 85
3	E/0	29/ 94	B/3	32/ 94
4	E/0	0/ 0	E/0	3/ 9
5	B/3	29/ 94	B/3	27/ 79
6	C/2	28/ 90	C/2	27/ 79
7	E/0	12/ 39	E/0	16/ 47
8	E/0	12/ 39	E/0	4/ 12
9	A/4	31/100	B/3	33/ 97
10	A/4	18/ 58	E/0	9/ 26
11	E/0	16/ 52	E/0	24/ 71
12	C/2	19/ 61	D/1	26/ 76
13	A/4	31/100	C/2	32/ 94
14	B/3	30/ 97	C/2	22/ 65
15	E/0	3/ 10	E/0	10/ 29
16	D/1	22/ 71	E/0	25/ 74
17	C/2	30/ 97	C/2	28/ 82
18	A/4	26/ 84	A/4	22/ 65
19	B/3	27/ 87	C/2	23/ 68
20	C/2	12/ 39	E/0	3/ 9
21	A/4	31/100	A/4	34/100
22	C/2	23/ 74	D/1	27/ 79
Total Points 48 Average 2.18			Total Points 35 Average 1.59	

Homework Average Percentage: 1st Qtr.- 72% 2nd Qtr. - 65%
Average Grade Changes: 1 rose; 10 dropped; 11 unchanged
Homework Changes: 7 rose; 13 dropped; 2 unchanged

The data indicate that the project was inglorious. Since neither grades nor homework turned in appeared to have improved. This was not an indication of the effectiveness of the intervention. Six weeks after the school year

started a new curriculum and a new text were implemented. The change was mandated by court order and produced the stultifing image of the intervention. In the course of writing this paper the district was found quilty in the discrimination law suit mentioned in Chapter One. Certain actions were ordered by the court to rectify and improve the education of all students.

One of the changes ordered was that algebra be introduced in the middle school - pre-algebra for seventh graders and algebra for eighth graders. On the first day of the 1993-1994 school year new textbooks were ordered for all seventh and eighth grade math classes. They arrived six weeks into the first quarter.

In comparison, the pre-algebra text covered integers in Chapter One; the text we started the year with introduced integers in chapter eleven. The students effectively lost ten chapters or nearly six months of their education. Homework assignments in the old text were twenty or thirty problems, in the new text some assignments were sixty problems long. The impression given when assignments were cut to more manageable lengths was negative. Students knew that with every explanation was followed with a given number of problems. To not be assigned all of those problems indicated to them that they were not "smart" enough to do the work.

As a measurement tool for the project, grades became impractical; we were no longer using the same criteria to

measure. There was no logical progression of mathematical facts, review of basic operations of whole numbers lead immediately to the use of integers in solving algebraic equations. First quarter grades were based on general math concepts, while the second quarter grades contended with the new text. The focus of the project then shifted to the perception of the students and their parents on the use of the bi-weekly survey. Perceptions are very difficult to measure in any objective manner.

The second terminal objective focused on the effect the bi-weekly survey would have on student behavior in the classroom. The observation checklist and discipline referral were the source for the evaluation of this portion of the intervention. Behavior for the fourth period pre-algebra class was above average for the first quarter and remained so for the second quarter. There were the usual number of in-class disturbances - talking out of turn, throwing paper, teasing, and arguing (friendly). These were all taken in stride and dealt with inside the boundaries of the classroom.

Truancy and absences did fall during the intervention. It was an area where the researcher and the parent could and did communicate problems. Students were aware that because of ongoing communication there was a double check on their attendance. The school had an automated phone reporting system for students who were marked absent or tardy. With the survey as backup, the student knew that it was just a

matter of time before any truancies were discovered. When there were legitimate absences, parents were able to determine if make-up work was completed and turned in. Excessive tardies were also double checked by the phone system and the survey. Neither of these became a problem for the class.

Reflections and Conclusions

The researcher was pleased with the information gathered with the use of the survey. It provided insight into the students' thinking and perception of the course. Parent comments revealed that, although they often wanted to help their children, they did not know how. Both parents and students felt lost with the change in curriculum. Few students were able to be successful in pre-algebra. The change was too dramatic for both parent and student to feel comfortable.

The survey was beneficial for the dissemination and gathering of information, yet for the researcher it was very time consuming even though only half the students in one class were polled each week. It was the time involved in the teacher portion of the intervention that made it impractical to expand to include all students.

The researcher did notice that students who participated in the intervention have subsequently been more willing to communicate their concerns, as compared to students in the researcher's other classes. They seem to be more comfortable expressing their ideas and concerns with

the researcher and the class. Parents who participated in the intervention, also, make more frequent contacts. So, even though grades were not affected as hoped, the project did open the doors for better communication between the those who participated in it.

Chapter 6

DECISIONS ON THE FUTURE

The Solution Strategy

The original concept for improving communication within the education triangle was and is a good idea. The reality was that unless everyone accepted an active role in the process, the concept was doomed to failure. Unless parents set goals and expectation with real, defined consequences, the concept had no impact. Unless students saw that their parents and teacher were interested, involved, and willing to help, the concept had no impact. Unless the teacher committed the time and energy to try and understand the problems and misconceptions of the students and parents, the concept had no impact. There must be full participation by the triumvirate for the most effective impact on learning.

The major focus of this intervention was to empower students and parents to become active participants in the process of learning. The teacher's role is to assist the student to set and achieve those goals that the student, the parent, the teacher, and the curriculum have established. When education fails, it is because these factors have not worked together to make it a success. It was to this end that the intervention was developed.

The time factor for the teacher is the only drawback that was not fully anticipated. Time would make the

continuation and expansion of the intervention impractical. Writing comments for sixty to seventy students over the weekend or even staggering them to fifteen or twenty a night would cause "burn-out" in a very short time. However, for students who demonstrated a problem in pre-algebra or had trouble setting their own study schedule or whose parents had a specific concern, this intervention would work far better than the daily progress sheet now in use in the middle school. This would include the "average" student who needs that little push, not just the struggling student.

Additional Applications

The middle school concept is, in part, an attempt to make home-school communication more practical. As a team, teachers have more opportunity to maintain contact with more parents. Team meetings set aside time for student concerns. When necessary, one team member is able to contact the parent with the concerns of all the team teachers. Many teams make it a policy to contact as many of the parents of their students as possible at the beginning of school. At this time that a little extra exertion to make contact with 100 percent of the households could make a large impact. In that contact could be established the ground work for the continued exchange of information. A letter at the beginning of the year listing the voice mail and extension number of the team teachers could go a long way to encourage parents to contact the team with information necessary for

the educational growth of the student. The middle school concept with a team working together could make use of my intervention.

Dissemination of Data and Recommendations

Teachers at all levels should be encouraged to contact the parents of all students in their classes. This should be done before the opening of school in the fall, so that there are no preconceived ideas for the contact. This could be done by phone or mail (although I believe that the phone would be preferable). A method to ensure that all the parents were contacted should be maintained so that follow ups could be done where necessary.

The initial contact with the parent should be a "welcome-to-school, we are looking forward to meeting you" form of introduction. Even asking to speak to the student, if using the phone, might create a positive atmosphere for the entire year. Informing the parent that a more detailed letter will follow alerts them to be looking for that information. We must assume that all parents are interested and willing to be involved in their student's education. We too often assume the opposite, and a "why bother" attitude. We as teachers must overcome these preconceived notions in order to encourage communication.

Further research is needed in the area of home-school communication. In doing the background for this paper it was apparent that there had been almost no research done on the effectiveness of keeping parents informed on the

progress of their students on a prearranged schedule. There has been a plethora of work done on the parent-teacher conference and other ways of getting parents into the school. But these are not meant as a planned repetitive exchange of information. The parent-teacher conference is usually designed for after the first and third grading periods. This represents an eighteen week gap in communication for the parent. And finding ways to get parents into the school is not the same as getting them involved in the students education.

The emphasis of my project was to get parents involved in the day to day education of their student. The need for a more indepth study of how to get parents involved in that way is apparent in the dearth of available research. The few articles there are on parental involvement dealt with broad generalizations about changing the curriculum to make it more meaningful to our modern society. None dealt with individual parents and their individual students.

A discrimination law suit has just been lost by the district in this study. The suit charged that students in schools of one dominate racial group had been treated differently than students in schools of another dominate racial group. In the last few months the goals of this district have changed drastically from the mission statements drafted by the schools only a year ago.

I believe that better communication between teachers and the home could go a long way to healing the rift that is

caused by a belief that discrimination of any kind has taken place. Making the parent an active participant in the education of their student ensures that decisions are made with the best interest of the student in mind.

While my intervention did not have the desired effect on the grades of the students involved it did provide all three participants the opportunity to voice their concerns. The more communication that takes place the better the chances that problems can be solved or avoided.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Parent Survey

Dear Parent:

As part of the effort to improve education we are asking for some information to help us better communicate with you. Please answer this short questionaire and have your student return it to his/her first hour teacher by Friday, May 28, 1993. Thank you very much for your help.

Please check all answers that apply.

1. Has your school contacted you at some time during the year?
   Yes_____ No_____

   If yes, how:

   Phone: Administrator _____
   Teacher _____
   Counselor _____

   Form letter: Administrator _____
   Teacher _____
   Counselor _____

   Personal letter: Administrator _____
   Teacher _____
   Counselor _____

   Home visit by: Administrator _____
   Teacher _____
   Counselor _____
   Home School Counselor _____
   Other (Specify) _____

   Newsletter from: School _____
   Team _____

   Parent-Teacher Conference: Conference Day _____
   Other _____

2. Was contact for Academic Achievement? _____
   or Behavior? _____
   Was the contact Positive? _____
   or Negative? _____

3. Have you been satisfied with your contact with the school?
   Yes _____ No _____

4. Have the contacts been frequent enough?
   Yes _____ No _____

Over

5. When being contacted by the school, what method would you prefer?
   - Phone _____
   - Letter (Mailed) _____
   - Letter (Student carried) _____
   - Home Visit _____
   - Other (Specify) _____

6. Are you available during school hours (7:30 - 2:30) for phone or personal conferences? Yes _____ No _____

7. Do you have access to a phone during school hours where you can make or receive calls? Yes _____ No_____

8. Do you attend after school events?
   - PTO Meeting _____
   - Open House _____
   - Science Olympiad _____
   - Other (Specify) _____

9. Did you attend the Parent-Teacher Conference Day?
   Yes _____ No _____

10. Do you believe teachers should hold evening and/or weekend conferences to accommodate working parents?
    Yes _____ No _____

11. Do you believe teachers should be paid for after school hour conferences? Yes _____ No _____

12. Would you like an "assignment hotline" phone system initiated at your school? Yes _____ No _____

13. Would you be willing to contribute to such a system?
    Yes _____ No _____

14. Under what circumstances would you like to be contacted by the school?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix B
Parent Information Letter

Dear Parent:

I am working on a project to help students become more aware of how their actions and habits affect their academic performance. Each week half the students will evaluate themselves on a form provided by me. The form will also contain comments from me and there will be space for your input as well.

The goal of this project is to provide a forum for the three of us to look at how, working together, we can make the educational process a team effort instead of putting all the weight and responsibility on the shoulders of the student. I feel that by opening the lines of communication you will understand my goals for your student and you can let me and your student know what you expect.

The form you will receive every other week will have the start of a sentence. I am looking for positive statements as well as any concerns. Please feel free to complete the sentences in any way you see fit. The three of us will be the only ones who will see the responses.

It is important that you participate along with your student and me. The better we communicate the more we can accomplish. The student will be expected to carry this home every two weeks and return it within two or three days. Any further delay will limit the time we can help the student. I hope this form will provide the tool to improve communication, however if you feel a phone call would be more effective please indicate that below. If you have any questions send a note with your student or feel free to call me at school. The voice mail number at Lincoln is 229-2410, my extension is 5003.

Sincerely,

Mr. Jaxon C. Oshita

- -

Tear off and return

Name of student _____
Please print

Parent/Guardian Name _____
Please print

I expect my student to carry
this information every two weeks. _____

I would prefer that you call me. Phone # _____

Best time to call _____

Parent Signature_____

Appendix C

Student Evaluation Form

The purpose of the "student evaluation" is to encourage students to relate their performance in the classroom with achieving their academic goals. Students and parents should discuss this form, keeping in mind, ways to improve or maintain performance. Please return to your teacher as soon as possible.

For the student:

1. I have improved

2. I need to improve

3. I really need help with

4. I would like my parents to know

For the parent:

1. I have seen _____ improve in
   Student Name

2. I am concerned about

3. _____ and I discussed
   Student Name

Teacher comments:

Signatures: Student _____ Date_____

Parent _____ Date_____

Teacher _____ Date_____

Jennifer

Appendix D

Student Evaluation Form

The purpose of the "student evaluation" is to encourage students to relate their performance in the classroom with achieving their academic goals. Students and parents should discuss this form, keeping in mind, ways to improve or maintain performance. Please return to your teacher as soon as possible.

For the student:

1. I have improved exponents
2. I need to improve scientific notation
3. I really need help with Estimating decimals
4. I would like my parents to know I'm sorry of Improving

For the parent:

1. I have seen Jennifer improve in the order of operations.
2. I am concerned about the way the book is organized.
3. Jennifer and I discussed the above.

Teacher comments: JENNIFER'S OVERALL GRADE THIS QUARTER HAS DROPPED DRAMATICALLY. HER GRADE ON THE CHAPTER 3 TEST SHOWED IMPROVEMENT, BUT IT IS NOT YET CLEAR IF IT IS ENOUGH. SHE IS NOT IN DANGER OF FAILING BUT I BELIEVE SHE SHOULD BE DOING MUCH BETTER.

Signatures: Student Jennifer T. Date 1-7-94

Parent [signature] Date 1-10-94

Teacher [signature] Date 1/6/94

BEST COPY AVAILABLE